

Ralph, it's a French name

We woke up in our tent next to the tracks in Slovenia near the Italian border. This area is a karst landscape full of caves, old shepherd huts, and petroglyphs. We spent the better part of the day walking trails in the sun to see what we could find. There was almost no one around. Unfortunately for B, due to me being antsy to get back on a freight, we didn't find any petroglyphs but we did find one old man walking around in his underwear.

B racked supplies at a chain supermarket and we charged up our phones at a petrol station with the ambiance of local men drinkin' beer and singin' folk songs. We grabbed some cardboard to sit on behind the market and hit the yard at dusk to play the waitin' game. A line of navy blue Ermewa grainers had power attached and it was facing the direction we wanted to go towards, Italy. This line was completely full of brand, new cars and there was no graffiti on any of them except for four cars in a row. The infamous one letter throw up of the letter 'M'. Around 9:30pm the lights came on in the yard, illuminating our waiting spot. We hid in between a string of Transwaggons and waited for our train to start rollin'. Thirty minutes later it took off and get on about half way back of the locomotive. I had painted a few of these cars before but I hadn't focused on the ends and with these models, we were basically riding suicide.

We made it into Italy safely but our destination was Venice and it was getting late so we decided to bail off and sleep for the night. I had been to this yard a few times and I had it memorized by where certain dead trains were in the yard. The plan was to find a famous gondola that I'd slept in before with a friend. We got off right at the commuter platform and immediately saw a group of workers having a conversation to the left of us. We darted the other way and through the lines...adrenaline pumping us up enough to carry the extra bags and tent we had with us. When we got to the back of the yard, I realized the dead cars were gone. Old sign ins and stories written in markal had been sent to the freight train cemetery. Ironically, I knew of a cemetery near the yard and we decided to go there and sleep. It took a while to get out of the yard due to the landmarks I had become familiar with being gone but we finally find our way to the winding road that leads to the dead.

It was still before midnight but the streets were deserted and dark. We found some cardboard in a dumpster to lay under our tent and started walking towards the cemetery. The sun had worn us both out and we were exhausted. It was an eerie and mostly silent night. We could hear creaking from the railyard and a light wind blowing through the trees. Then seemingly out of nowhere, a noise in the bushes and a shadow flashed across the street and into a blue hue on the road coming from a lone streetlight. A wild hog ran right in front of us! He was not scared of us. It looked like he had either just committed a crime or he was trying desperately to tell us something. We kept walking and a few minutes later, a car started creepin' down the street we were walking down. I knew what the hog was trying to tell us, "Police are near".

The cop car passed us and circled back around towards us. After realizing we didn't speak Italian, the cop in the passenger's seat asked us in broken English, "What you are doing?". I walked over to the car, "looking for a Russian cemetery so we can camp". The officer replied, "You know that's not normal? Why would you choose to live like this?".

“Why would you choose to be a cop?”, I replied.

After searching for a shelter that we could go to and running our documents, the cops ended up letting us camp at the cemetery. We walked away with an uneasy feeling but knowing it could’ve been much worse.

In the morning we packed up and walked over to the commuter station to fill our water bottles. After last night, I knew it was going to be much harder to hop out of here. Those dead trains were not only a shelter, but a perfect place to wait on a train. B took a bird bath in the pristine Italian train station bathroom and I took mental notes of the yard and watched how they worked a couple of lines. About an hour later we saw power hook up to a line of Transcereaes grainers facing in the direction we wanted to go to. I knew with the amount of stuff we had that it would be almost impossible to get through the lines unnoticed but we decided to just go for it.

We went back through the cemetery and over the fence into the yard. We hid behind a tree...behind an abandoned yard house and then to the one dead car remaining in the yard and finally to the cars in traffic. I lay my pack down with B and went to see for myself how many lines over that our train was. 9. Nine lines. Typically, I like to just wait for the line to move but I didn’t think that was possible here. We decided to just go to our train and get on and watch out for workers.

I had noticed while watching them work that the workers seemed to always work the line from back to front so we got on a grainer dirty face (forward facing). A few minutes later a worker came down the line and walked right past us without noticing us. He walks about three cars ahead of us and turns around and looks in our direction and for some reason he doesn’t see us. When he turns around again, our train starts to move! I get up out of the well and look down the line and I spot another worker. There’s absolutely no way he doesn’t see us if we stay riding dirty face so we leave the bags and move across to the back end of the connected grainer. This was the wrong move though because now the first worker is watching the line pull off but somehow it doesn’t matter because just as we were passing both workers looked the opposite direction and just like that we were rolling away down the coastline of the Adriatic Sea.

We stopped for clearance once on top of a very scenic bridge and that was it. Smooth sailing. A few hours before dark we pulled into a commuter station just outside of Venice and basically came to a stop right in front of the police station. In a split second we decided to get off. We got some food, including some free fruits and vegetables from a nice lady at a farmer’s market and B found us a cool spot to camp on the canal. Like most nights early on in this trip, it rained and we were so thankful to have this little tent. Watching fragments of Princess Mononoke and eating racked food every night while it rained...this tent had become our home.

The following day B went to the emergency room to deal with a lingering throat infection and afterwards we got some food and decided to try and hitchhike from a tiny roundabout in the heart of this small city near Venice. I asked B if she just wanted to fly a sign and eat at the hitchhiking spot but it was kind of raining on and off so she suggested we eat under an awning across the street. We sat down our packs and started to prepare salads. We had kind of made a game of this. Trying to see who could rack the most expensive cheeses and I’ve honestly never eaten this well on a trip before. It makes a huge difference for my mental health and my pocket considering that almost all the ingredients were stolen courtesy of the rack queen.

We had just started eating when an older man walked by us. He was wearing a black beanie, a grey rain jacket, slacks, and boots and was pushing a red bicycle along the sidewalk. He stopped right in front of us and looked our direction and muttered something under his breath. I looked at B and said, "What's this dude's problem?". He hears me saying this and immediately starts making fun of my accent, "I'm from N'awwwlins (New Orleans), I speak with a southern drawwwwl". I actually started laughing. He was a state over from Texas but close enough. He asked us what we were doing and we told him that we were hitchhiking around Europe. He instantly told us that it would not work here and suggested we go to Germany. It turns out the man is German. When I asked for his name he said, "Ralph, it's a French name". He managed to say this line three times in our short conversation. Ralph said he'd spent time in the armed forces and made friends with some guys from New Orleans.

He looked us up and down. We were filthy and he asked us how we were getting around and if we had any money. We told him we had our ways. He offered us money twice and without hesitation we declined. He then suggested we take a train to Munich and try our luck hitchhiking from there. He was getting more creative in trying to help us out. "It would be much easier", Ralph said. He used to hitchhike around back in the day. Ralph was really charismatic and he reminded me of Bill Murray. It became clear that he was not going to take no for an answer.

I got this feeling from Ralph that maybe he knew his time was near and he saw visions of himself in us. I think B and I both realized at the same time that this was just the way of the road. Maybe one day we would be in this same position to help fellow wanderers. When Ralph asked us for the third time to help us out, we decided it was ok. He asked for one of us to go to the ATM with him and B said she would go with him. Around fifteen minutes later they both return smiling and laughing. B walks up to me and opens my hand and hands me some rolled up money. Two hundred and fifty euros. I look at Ralph and I am overwhelmed and blown away. He told us it was nothing for him to do this and we thank him over and over.

Ralph grabs his red bicycle and looks at us, "I want my spirit to live on through you guys".

He smiles and walks away into the Italian sunset.

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13.7.22